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ABSTRACT

This report summarizes past and current research on female gangs, noting programmatic and research needs. Seven sections include: "Early Reports: A History of Stereotypes"; "Number of Female Gang Members"; "Being in a Gang: The Background" (economic and ethnic forces, family pressure, and sex stereotyping and victimization); "Delinquency and Criminality of Female Gang Members" (sources of information about female gang offending: law enforcement agency reports, surveys of at-risk youth, and field studies; levels of offending; types of offenses; and drug dealing); "Ethnicity and Gender Roles in the Gang" (African American and Latina gangs and other ethnic groups); "Long-Term Consequences"; and "Taking Female Gangs Seriously: Areas for Further Research" (female gang formation, reasons for joining gangs, ethnicity, gender roles in gangs, delinquency and criminality, and later-life consequences of female gang membership). The report concludes that there is a paucity of research on the subject, partly because researchers face serious obstacles to studying female gangs (e.g., gangs are highly suspicious of researchers, and female gang members are adverse to talking about sexual abuse). Female gangs have also received little programmatic attention. Much more work is needed to address the needs of females involved with gangs. (Contains 75 references.) (SM)

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JUVENILE JUSTICE BULLETIN

Female Gangs: A Focus on Research

Joan Moore and John Hagedorn

The proliferation of youth gangs since 1980 has fueled the public's fear and magnified possible misconceptions about youth gangs. To address the mounting concern about youth gangs, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's (OJJDP's) Youth Gang Series delves into many of the key issues related to youth gangs. The series considers issues such as gang migration, gang growth, female involvement with gangs, homicide, drugs and violence, and the needs of communities and youth who live in the presence of youth gangs.

Much of the research on gangs has ignored females or trivialized female gangs.[1] Influential early studies of gangs, which for years shaped the research agenda, concentrated almost exclusively on males. The implicit message of these studies was that female gangs were unimportant. Even within the past decade an expert commented: "The notion seems to be that female gangs and their members are 'pale imitations' of male gangs" (Spergel, 1995, p. 90).

Given the lack of research, much of what has been written about female gangs and then reproduced in textbooks has been based on the reports of journalists and social workers and on the statements of male gang members. With the exception of a very few early studies, gang researchers did not begin to take female gangs seriously until the 1980's, when Campbell's (1984a) book on New York gangs appeared. Even now, there continue to be methodological problems with many reports on female gangs. This Bulletin summarizes both past and current research on female gangs and draws attention to programmatic and research needs. It considers the underlying reasons for female gang membership, assesses the delinquency and criminal activity of female gang members, examines how ethnicity and gender norms may influence female gang behavior, and discusses the long-term consequences of gang membership for females. It concludes with some proposals for future research.

Early Reports: A History of Stereotypes

Gangs are studied because they are of social concern. That concern stems from typically "masculine" acts of vandalism, violence, and other serious threats. It was often assumed that females did not take part in such behavior, so early researchers were not interested in the delinquency of female gang members.[2] Researchers and journalists saw gangs as a quintessentially male phenomenon. Thus, most early reports focused on whether female gangs were "real" gangs or merely satellites of male groups. One review concluded that in these early studies, "girls were defined solely in terms of their . . . relations to male gang members" (Campbell, 1990, p. 166).

A Message From OJJDP

For many years, female gangs were regarded simply as satellites of male gangs and rigorous research to better understand them was rarely undertaken. This oversight has resulted in gaps in our knowledge about the girls and young women who are at risk for gang involvement and juvenile delinquency.

Part of OJJDP's Youth Gang Series, this Bulletin represents a step toward rectifying the deficiencies of prior research. It summarizes past and present research and tracks the rise in the number of female gangs and the increased public recognition of female gang involvement as a significant social problem.

The authors consider the motivations for female gang membership, assess the delinquency and criminal activity of female gang members, examine the influence of ethnicity and gender norms on female gang behavior, and discuss the long-term consequences of gang membership. Recommendations for future research are also offered.

Girls and young women who are at risk for gang involvement deserve our attention and assistance. This Bulletin provides a historical and research context that will enable us to better understand this serious societal problem and to determine its solutions.

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"Sex objects or tomboys"—these are the images that, until recently, dominated the literature on female gang members. Individual females were portrayed in terms of their sexual activity, with an occasional mention of their functions as weapon carriers for male gang members (e.g., Spergel, 1964). Even when describing female gang members as tomboys, researchers emphasized that the females' motivations were focused on males. Miller (1973, p. 34), for instance, explained that "the behavior of the [girls] . . . appeared to be predicated on the assumption that the way to get boys to like you was to be like them rather than [sexually] accessible to them." Campbell (1984a) points out that "sex object" and "tomboy" are both variants of the "bad girl" role. Good girls are modest and feminine; bad girls are not.

These studies were conducted before women entered the labor market in such large numbers as they do today. It was an era when most people viewed homemaking as the only acceptable goal for women. The studies reflected the widespread notion that for males, gang membership might involve delinquency, but it does not violate gender-role norms. However, gang membership for females was more shocking because it involved real deviance and seriously violated gender-role norms.

The accuracy of early descriptions of female gang members as sex objects and tomboys is difficult to judge because there are not enough reliable data in these reports. Most historical information about female gangs comes from journalists (e.g., Asbury, 1927; Rice, 1963), who were likely to emphasize the sensational, and from social workers (e.g., Hanson, 1964; Welfare Council of New York City, 1950), who were likely to emphasize members' personal problems. Both sources fed the "bad girl" stereotype.

However, in retrospect, the early skepticism about whether female gangs were "real gangs" seems odd. It seems to have been based on a very narrow view of what a gang really is. Gangs—male and female alike—differ greatly from one another. Those differences affect the behavior of young members and their chances of maturing into conventional, law-abiding adults. A female gang may be autonomous or allied with a male gang, or female gang members may be part of a fully gender-integrated gang (Miller, 1975). Unfortunately, there is not enough information to determine how each kind of gang structure affects the members' behavior (Miller, 2000a). Existing information does indicate, however, that joining a gang—regardless of the gang's structure—is a significant act for an adolescent female, often with important consequences later in life.

Number of Female Gang Members

Both male and female gangs proliferated in the 1980's and 1990's. Although the percentage of gang members who were female is difficult to ascertain, all sources agree the numbers were significant.

Nationwide surveys of law enforcement agencies provide the most widely used data, although they have limitations. The first such survey, conducted in the mid-1970's, estimated that 10 percent of all gang members were female (Miller, 1975). Some 20 years later, in 1992, another nationwide survey found that only 3.7 percent of all gang members were female (Spergel, 1995). A criminologist associated with the latter survey commented that this low proportion may have resulted because 32 percent of the surveyed jurisdictions did not, "as a matter of policy," identify females as gang members (Curry and Decker, 1998, p. 98). Two other nationwide surveys of law enforcement agencies, conducted in 1996 and 1998, estimated that 11 percent and 8 percent, respectively, of all gang members were female (Moore and Terrett, 1998; National Youth Gang Center, 2000).

Other sources provide figures that are much higher than most law enforcement estimates. In surveys of youth in a wide range of cities, for example, the proportion of self-identified gang members who were female ranged from 8 to 38 percent, and the proportion of females surveyed who claimed gang membership ranged from 9 to 22 percent (Bjerregard and Smith, 1993; Cohen et al., 1994; Esbensen and Huizinga, 1993; Esbensen and Deschenes, 1998; Esbensen and Osgood, 1997; Fagan, 1990). Such surveys provide a valuable supplement to police sources, despite some limitations (which are discussed on page 4). The high number of female gang members recorded in self-report studies may reflect the younger ages of survey respondents compared with the ages of youth on police rosters: females tend to drop out of gang life at earlier ages than males, often because of pregnancy (cf. Moore, 1991). Finally, field research, although its reports are usually limited to one time and place, can offer additional insights. For example, in San Antonio, TX, field research has identified groups of girls who consistently hang out with male gangs. Even though they rarely define themselves as gangs, they may be seen as "gangs" by outsiders (Valdez and Cepeda, 1998). In some cities, females constitute up to one-third of the members in some gang cliques but are completely absent in others (Moore, 1991).

Surprisingly, female gangs are somewhat more likely to be found in small cities and rural areas than in large cities. Their ethnicity varies from one region to another, with African American gangs predominant in the Midwest and Northeast and Latina gangs predominant in the Southwest (National Youth Gang Center, 2000).

Being in a Gang: The Background

Joining a gang is a significant, potentially life-altering, event. The reasons for any single juvenile's joining a gang are complex and personal. Though most females join gangs for friendship and self-affirmation (Campbell, 1984a, 1987; Moore, 1991), recent research has begun to shed some light on economic and family pressures motivating many young women to join gangs.

Economic and Ethnic Forces

Throughout the 20th century, poverty and economic marginality were associated with the emergence of youth gangs, but in the 1980's and early 1990's, the loss of hundreds of thousands of factory jobs made conditions even worse in America's inner cities.[3] Hagedorn's (1988) study of gang formation in Milwaukee, WI, a city then suffering economic decline, shows that although the parents of most gang members usually held good jobs, these jobs had disappeared by the time their children were grown. It is not surprising that gangs proliferated rapidly during this period, not only in Milwaukee but throughout the Nation.[4] (See Hagedorn, 1988, 1998; Moore, 1991; Padilla, 1992; Taylor, 1990, 1993.) An informal economy flourished. Although much of the work associated with this economy was legal, a substantial portion involved drug dealing

and other illicit activities, and gang members joined in. (See page 5 for a more extensive discussion of the drug-dealing activities of female gang members.) In Chicago, IL, for example, economically successful gangs—female and male—became significant community institutions, sometimes offering resources and protection to neighbors (Venkatesh, 1996, 1998).

Female gang members have been affected not only by these economic shifts but by recent changes in the welfare system. Welfare has been an important economic resource for many of them. In Los Angeles, CA, for example, Mexican American gang members active in the 1950's and 1970's became pregnant, on average, at age 18. They tended to rely on welfare, combined with work and help from their families, to survive (Moore and Long, 1987). Similar patterns were found in Milwaukee in the 1990's (Hagedorn, 1998). However, welfare reforms introduced in the mid-1990's have reduced or eliminated welfare payments. Because female gang members often face significant barriers to legitimate employment, it is unclear what they will do to replace welfare support.

Ethnic marginality often lies behind economic marginality. In the 1920's, most gang members were children of European immigrants (Thrasher, 1927). By the 1980's, most were African American and Latino. In recent years, large-scale immigration from Spanish-speaking countries and from Asia has changed the ethnic composition of the United States. Increasingly, gangs tend to be Latino and Asian (National Youth Gang Center, 2000). Because ethnicity is closely related to gender roles (as discussed on page 6), this nationwide shift in ethnicity has important implications for female gangs.

Family Pressure

There is one aspect of female gang life that does not seem to be changing—the gang as a refuge for young women who have been victimized at home. The available research consistently shows that high proportions of female gang members have experienced sexual abuse at home. In Los Angeles, for example, 29 percent of a large representative sample of Mexican American female gang members had been sexually abused at home, and their homes

were more likely than those of male gang members to include drug users and persons arrested for crimes (Moore, 1991, 1994). Another study found that almost two-thirds of female gang members interviewed in Hawaii had been sexually abused at home. Many had run away and had joined gangs to obtain protection from abusive families (Joe and Chesney-Lind, 1995; Chesney-Lind, Shelden, and Joe, 1996).[3] A recent report sums up young women's reasons for joining a gang: "[T]he vast majority noted family problems as contributing factors," citing drug addiction and abuse as the most common problems (Miller, 2000b).

Joining a gang can be an assertion of independence not only from family, but also from cultural and class constraints. In joining a gang, young Puerto Rican women in New York felt that they would be able to express themselves as assimilated Americans, spending money freely and standing up for themselves. "[They] construct . . . an image of the gang that counterpoints the suffocating futures they face" (Campbell, 1990, p. 173). In Los Angeles, Mexican American gangs were described as "a substitute institution . . . [providing] meaning and identity" (Quicker, 1983, p. 28) or "their own system in which they [could] belong," in the absence of "clear or satisfactory access to adult status" (Harris, 1988, p. 166). In San Francisco, CA, a large, multiethnic study of female gang members describes them as "resisting normative forms of femininity" but also as "devising alternative forms of femininity" (Joe-Laidler and Hunt, in press).

Sex: Stereotyping and Victimization

"Sex object" was one of the early stereotypes of female gang members, and the interest in the sex lives of female gang members still persists. Early reports about the easy sexual availability of female gang members came almost exclusively from male gang members (e.g., Short and Strodtbeck, 1965). Even some recent reports present similar male perceptions as fact, with no attempt at verification (Sanchez-Jankowski, 1991). However, male gang members may be indulging their own fantasies. In a recent study, male gang members told researchers that group sex was an initiation ritual for female gang members, but female gang members dismissed the idea as ludicrous (Decker and Van Winkle, 1996).

In Los Angeles, a large random sample of male and female Mexican American gang members was asked about the role of women in the gang (Moore, 1991). Half of the male members claimed that female members were "possessions." This response not only referred to the females' sexual exploitation but also reflected the males' general need to be in charge. The other half of the male members felt that female members were respected and treated like family. (About two-thirds of the female members vehemently denied that they were treated like possessions.)

In San Antonio, where there are many Mexican American gangs but few female gangs or gang members, most females who associate with male gang members are respected. But "hoodrats"—females involved in "frequent partying, drug

using, participation in illegal activities and multiple sexual encounters"—are not deemed worthy of respect (Valdez and Cepeda, 1998, pp. 6–7).

Although male gang members may exaggerate their sexual domination over female members, there are reports from females that they have been sexually exploited by males within the gang. In San Francisco, females from an immigrant Salvadoran gang reportedly often were sexually victimized by male gang members, although this rarely happened in a nearby Mexican American gang (Brotherton, 1996). Sexual abuse and exploitation by male gang members were also reported by some subsets of female gang members in Columbus, OH (Miller, 1998); Milwaukee (Hagedorn, 1998); Phoenix, AZ (Portillos, 1999); Chicago (Venkatesh, 1998); and Los Angeles (Moore, 1991).[6] Some of these reports may have been from females who were only marginal to the gang. In Milwaukee, for example, females controlled admission to their gang (a female auxiliary to the male gang), but female "wannabes" seeking to become members thought that males controlled admission. The male members tricked some female wannabes into group sex by telling them it was an initiation ritual. It was not, and females who participated in the group sex did not become members of the gang (Hagedorn and Devitt, 1999). A similar situation existed in Phoenix (Portillos, 1999). Evidence of sexual exploitation of female gang members at home and within their gangs is one reason for considering female gang membership a serious social concern.

Delinquency and Criminality of Female Gang Members

Whether female gangs are seen as a serious problem depends in large part on the level of their delinquent and criminal activities and the types of offenses they commit. Unfortunately, getting definitive information about these topics is difficult. It means working through many detailed studies, often conducted in several cities that differ in important ways. The findings of these studies are not easily generalized, but some conclusions can be drawn. This section reviews three major sources of information, draws some general conclusions about female gang members' delinquency and criminality, and then focuses on female gang members' involvement in drug dealing.

Sources of Information About Female Gang Offending

There are three major sources of information about female gang members' criminality and delinquency: law enforcement agency reports, surveys of at-risk youth, and field studies. These sources supplement each other and offer a basis for drawing some conclusions about female gang members' offending.

Law enforcement agency reports. Law enforcement reports on arrests of female gang members have been compiled for several large cities. They offer the only information available about female gang members' actual involvement with the justice system. However, because police have traditionally underarrested females, these reports may well understate the involvement of female gang members in crime (see Chesney-Lind, Shelden, and Joe, 1996; Taylor, 1993).[7] Only one nationwide survey of law enforcement agencies (conducted in 1992) asked about the criminality of female gang members (Curry, Ball, and Fox, 1994) and, as noted previously, that survey probably underestimated the problem because, "as a matter of policy," many jurisdictions did not count females as gang members (Curry and Decker, 1998). An additional problem with law enforcement agency reports as a source of information is that jurisdictions often differ in how they identify an offense as "gang related."[8]

Surveys of at-risk youth. Surveys of at-risk adolescents (who are usually contacted at a school or social service agency) provide a different perspective. Among other questions, these surveys typically ask about respondents' gang involvement and about whether and how often they have committed certain offenses. These surveys are the only source of information about how the delinquency of gang youth differs from that of nongang youth. However, youth answering a questionnaire may be tempted either to conceal or to exaggerate delinquency. Since most surveys are anonymous, such self-reports are difficult to verify. However, a study of middle school males in Chicago found that a little more than half (51.5 percent) of those who self-reported both delinquency and gang involvement had also been identified by the police as delinquent (Curry, in press). Almost all of the youth whom police identified as gang members also self-reported gang membership (Curry, in press). This study's finding of a disparity between self-reported and police-reported delinquency rates may indicate that respondents exaggerated their delinquency, escaped police detection, or dropped out of the gang before the police were able to identify them.

Field studies. Field studies have a venerable tradition in gang research and continue to be a major source of insight about gang life. Many of these studies, however, do not raise the issue of criminality, and most are confined to one time and one place, making it difficult to generalize from their findings. More important, since gang females are usually difficult to reach, researchers often report on very small and/or seriously unrepresentative samples of female gang members. Although field research offers a level of

National Youth Gang Center

As part of its comprehensive, coordinated response to America's gang problem, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) funds the National Youth Gang Center (NYGC). NYGC assists State and local jurisdictions in the collection, analysis, and exchange of information on gang-related demographics, legislation, literature, research, and promising program strategies. NYGC coordinates activities of the OJJDP Gang Consortium, a group of Federal agencies, gang program representatives, and service providers that works to coordinate gang information and programs. NYGC also provides training and technical assistance for OJJDP's Rural Gang, Gang-Free Schools, and Gang-Free Communities Initiatives. For more information, contact:

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understanding of individual motivation and gang social structure not available through other sources, findings from such studies must be approached critically.

Levels of Offending

Many, but not all, female gang members are involved in some kind of delinquency or criminality. Youth surveys consistently show that delinquency rates of female gang members are lower than those of male gang members but higher than those of nongang females and even nongang males (Esbensen and Huizinga, 1993; Bjerregard and Smith, 1993; Fagan, 1990). In Rochester, NY, for example, 66 percent of female gang members and 82 percent of male gang members reported involvement in at least one serious delinquent act, compared with only 7 percent of nongang females and 11 percent of nongang males (Bjerregard and Smith, 1993). By contrast, a survey of youth in three cities—Chicago, Los Angeles, and San Diego—classified 40 percent of female gang members and 15 percent of male gang members as, at most, "petty delinquents." The three-city study also found that although 33 percent of the female gang members and 43 percent of the males reported using hard drugs, almost one-third of the females and 25 percent of the males said they were not using drugs or alcohol at all (Fagan, 1990).

Types of Offenses

In general, female gang members commit fewer violent crimes than male gang members and are more inclined to property crimes and status offenses.[9] These gender patterns were found in a nationwide 1992 survey of law enforcement agencies and also in analyses of data on arrests from Honolulu, HI, and Chicago (Curry, Ball, and Fox, 1994; Chesney-Lind, Shelden, and Joe, 1996; Block et al., 1996). In Chicago, the disparity was very large. Not only were male gang members more likely than female gang members to commit serious crimes, but there were a great many more male gang members than females (and police may also have been more likely to arrest males). Between 1965 and 1994, the number of arrests of male gang members was much greater than that for females: "[t]he ratio of males to females was 15.6:1 for nonlethal violence [and] 39:1 for drug offenses," and only 1.1 percent of offenders in gang-related homicides were female (Block et al., 1996, p. 10).

Some might conclude from these data that female gang members are not violent enough to be of concern. However, an 11-city survey of eighth graders undertaken in the mid-1990's found that more than 90 percent of both male and female gang members reported having engaged in one or more violent acts in the previous 12 months (Esbensen and Osgood, 1997). The researchers found that 78 percent of female gang members reported being involved in gang fights, 65 percent reported carrying a weapon for protection, and 39 percent reported attacking someone with a weapon (Deschenes and Esbensen, 1999). These and similar findings prompted the authors of this study to recommend that gang prevention and intervention efforts be directed specifically at females.

Drug Dealing

Drug offenses are among the most common offenses committed by female gang members. In Los Angeles County, an analysis of lifetime arrest records of female gang members revealed that drug offenses were the most frequent cause for arrest (California Department of Justice, 1997). Special tabulations from Chicago show that between 1993 and 1996, either drug offenses or violent offenses were the most common cause for arrest of female gang members (see table).[10]

Law enforcement records document but do not explain these high rates of drug arrests for female gang members. Several field studies, however, provide some related insights into female gang members' participation in drug dealing, perhaps the most important criminal activity of the 1990's. In the early 1980's, Moore and Mata (1981) interviewed 85 heroin-addicted Mexican American female gang members about their experiences in dealing heroin in Los Angeles. Female dealers, who were often addicts themselves, frequently obtained their stock of heroin from their own suppliers and occasionally from relatives. A few females began to deal drugs when their dealing husbands went to prison. Most female dealers were working for someone else, although there were a few powerful female career dealers.[11] The drug-dealing patterns of these women may be used—with caution—to illustrate drug-dealing patterns of other Mexican American gang members prior to the cocaine/crack epidemic that began in the

Gang-Related Charges for Female Arrestees in Chicago: 1993–96

	Female Arrestees With Gang-Related Charge (%)			
Offense*	**1993**	**1994**	**1995**	**1996**
Violent (total)	46.9	40.3	34.4	38.5
Homicide	0.2	0.1	0.0	0.1
Simple battery	17.6	16.1	14.1	14.9
Mob action	9.7	5.7	3.8	4.8
All other violent offenses	19.4	18.4	16.5	18.7
Drug (total)	36.4	37.9	44.4	37.7
Cocaine possession	14.3	9.8	8.8	2.6
Crack possession	7.0	11.6	13.9	15.6
All other drug offenses	15.1	16.5	21.7	19.5
Prostitution	0.8	1.5	4.1	9.8
Property	5.1	3.4	4.4	5.1
Weapons	3.7	4.3	2.5	2.8
Liquor	5.6	10.7	7.3	3.5
Other	2.2	1.7	2.7	2.3

Note: Percentages may not total 100 because of rounding. Total number (n) of cases per year: 1993, *n*=2,023; 1994, *n*=2,029; 1995, *n*=2,021; 1996, *n*=2,193.

* With the exception of vice offenses (drug, prostitution, and gambling), gang-related offenses are defined by referring to the motive of the offender. Vice offenses are considered gang-related if they involve a known gang member. Almost all liquor offenses involve underage drinking.

Source: These data were drawn from special tabulations provided to the authors by the Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority (1998).

mid-1980's in most cities. By extrapolating from the Moore and Mata findings, it can be estimated that 20 percent of all Mexican American female gang members in this period may have dealt heroin at some time during their careers.

A 1990's study (Moore and Hagedorn, 1996) of African American and Latina female gang members in Milwaukee documents a very different situation. Many more females were dealing drugs, although they were less likely to do so than were males. About one-half of the female gang members and three-quarters of the male gang members had sold cocaine at some time in their lives. The proportion was higher for Latina females (72 percent) and Latino males (81 percent) than for African American females (31 percent) and males (69 percent). In at least one African American gang neighborhood, two drug houses were run independently by females whose male relatives were in a gang.

These findings indicate that, by the 1990's, drug dealing was much more common among female gang members in Milwaukee than it had been among female gang members in Los Angeles a decade earlier. A 1990's study in San Francisco found that drug dealing in an African American gang was important enough to cause a rift between male and female gang members. Female members became so dissatisfied with the income they were receiving from male dealers that they withdrew from the gang and went into business for themselves (Lauterback, Hansen, and Waldorf, 1992). A later report on this female gang contrasted its complete control over drug dealing with the less extensive or nonexistent drug-dealing activities of females in two other gangs: a nearby Mexican American gang, whose female members were permitted to deal as independent individuals, and an immigrant Salvadoran gang, whose female members were subservient to the male members and were not allowed to deal drugs (Brotherton, 1996). Female gang members (mostly African American) in Columbus, OH, also reported being explicitly debarred from selling drugs (Miller, 1998).

Taylor (1993) presents the most extensive examination to date of drug dealing by female gang members. He followed up his study of Detroit's dangerous "corporate gangs"—that is, gangs organized for "financial gain by criminal action" (1993, p. 19)—with a companion book on female gangs. Taylor traces the female presence in Detroit's gangs back to the 1950's, but it was not until the 1970's, with the growing presence of hard drugs and the emergence of more criminally oriented ("commercial") gangs, that females began to play a more active role. By the 1980's, corporate gangs dominated Detroit's street economy, and by the 1990's, females were involved in both autonomous (all-female) and gender-integrated selling crews. Taylor's study leaves little doubt that the position of females in the drug-dealing business has changed, contemporaneous with the devastating collapse of job opportunities in Detroit's inner city and the parallel collapse of neighborhood social structures.[12] Taylor's historical perspective provides a context for other studies discussed in this Bulletin. As drug dealing became more common among gang members, autonomous female dealers occasionally emerged. There is also a great deal of local variation, as shown by the contrasting roles of Latinas in Los Angeles (Moore and Mata, 1981), Milwaukee (Moore and Hagedorn, 1996), and San Francisco (Brotherton, 1996).

Ethnicity and Gender Roles in the Gang

Most female gangs are either African American or Latina, although there are small but increasing numbers of Asian and white female gangs. Autonomy and male dominance, which are ongoing issues for all female gangs, tend to vary with ethnicity. For example, gender expectations in each ethnic group might suggest that African American and white female gang members would be more autonomous and Latinas more subordinate to males. They usually are, but not always. In other words, there is no universal ethnic continuum. Indeed, some factors related to female autonomy and male dominance affect gang members regardless of ethnicity. Male unemployment and the incarceration of the many males who are convicted of illegal economic activities remove males from both Latino and African American households. As a result, women must rely on their own resources to support themselves and their children.

African American and Latina Gangs

One of the first researchers to investigate African American female gangs was Laura Fishman, who was on a team studying an African American female gang in Chicago in the early 1960's. Later, in a reanalysis of her field notes, Fishman argued that although the women in this gang were likely to play subordinate roles, they also showed elements of autonomy, committing "male crimes" and invading rival gang territory (Fishman, 1988, 1998). Autonomy was the keynote in a study of African American female gang members in Philadelphia, PA, in the 1970's. Most of the gangs were gender integrated and seemed to reflect gender equality: "The female is an intrinsic part of the gang's group identity who participates in gang activities . . . rather than just ancillary activities" (Brown, 1977, p. 226). Taylor, studying Detroit gangs (1993), concurs. Former female gang members reported that even though police ignored them, they were just as involved in gang warfare, drinking, and sex as the male members of their gangs. Taylor also found females in all types of gangs—from rowdy neighborhood groups to corporate, drug-dealing enterprises.

Further evidence of autonomy among African American female gangs was found in a substantial field study comparing African American and Latina (mostly Puerto Rican) gangs in Milwaukee in the 1990's. African American females were more likely than Latinas to feel that they, not the male gang members, controlled their gangs. By the time they had reached their late twenties, most of the African American and Latina females had ceased to participate in their gangs. African Americans were more likely than Latinas to be employed, less likely to be on welfare, more likely to have moved away from their old gang neighborhoods, and less likely to use cocaine (Hagedorn and Devitt, 1999; Hagedorn, Torres, and Giglio, 1998). The comparison showed that "[f]or Latinas, . . . gang membership tended to have a significant influence on their later lives, but for African American[s] . . . the gang tended to be an episode" (Moore and Hagedorn, 1996, p. 210).

Latina gangs (Mexican Americans in the Southwest and Puerto Ricans in New York) have been studied more than African American female gangs. Latina gangs have been continuously present in Los Angeles since the 1930's. Interviews with a large, representative sample of Latina females and Latino males from Los Angeles gangs active in the 1950's and 1970's revealed considerable change. The earlier female gangs were more autonomous and, although they fought rival female gangs, they did not fight side-by-side with males. The more recent female gang members

did. They were also more likely to use hard drugs (see Long, 1990) and to feel that the gang played an important part in their lives.[13] In both periods, female gang members were more likely than male gang members to come from troubled families and were far more likely to have run away from home. Another study of Mexican American gangs in Los Angeles reported that even though the female gangs were auxiliaries to male gangs, they often acted independently and their cliques held firmly to an egalitarian norm (Quicker, 1983). Indications of assertiveness were also found in a study of Mexican American female gang members in Phoenix (Moore, Vigil, and Levy, 1995). However, another study in Phoenix reported a persistent and pervasive double standard among Mexican American gang members—particularly when it came to sexuality (Portillos, 1999).

New York's Puerto Rican female gangs were first analyzed in lengthy biographies of former members (Campbell, 1984a).[14] Within their gangs, females took on different roles—"loose" girls versus "good" girls or "mother figures" versus "tomboys"—but all were dominated by males. Campbell (1984b) analyzed 64 fights involving Puerto Rican female gang members and found that most were generated by domestic conflicts and challenges to honor rather than by gang issues. Opponents of females in these fights were just as likely to be male as female. Campbell argued that female gang members are deeply conservative regarding gender roles. She was also one of the first researchers to discuss the importance of motherhood to female gang members and to note their desire to maintain a reputation within the gang as good mothers (Campbell, 1987).

The number of gangs declined sharply in New York in the 1980's and early 1990's. However, when Puerto Ricans began going to prison in large numbers, new gangs emerged in prison and on the streets. These new gangs included the Latin Kings (Curtis and Hamid, 1997). Preliminary research on the Latin Queens (the female counterpart to the Latin Kings) corroborates Campbell's observation that male domination in Puerto Rican gangs tends to socially isolate females (Hamid, 1996). However, in the mid-1990's, when increasing numbers of Latin Kings were imprisoned, the females' roles changed dramatically. The Latin Queens who remained in the neighborhood became leaders, maintaining communication between incarcerated Kings and gang members still on the streets. The street branches of the Latin Kings became distinct from the prison branches. As females became more important, these street branches became more likely to emphasize community problem solving and to discourage violence (see also Venkatesh, 1998). By the late 1990's, the prison and street branches were in conflict (Curtis, John Jay College, personal communication, 1998). The high rates of imprisonment that have accompanied the Nation's war on drugs may have generated similar changes in gangs elsewhere, but these changes have not yet been documented. This is an important area for research.

In Milwaukee, slight differences in perceptions of autonomy were found between Mexican American and Puerto Rican members of the major Latina gangs. (Large samples from eight gangs, including almost all members of the largest gang, were interviewed in the mid-1990's.) Whereas Mexican Americans saw their gang as a separate, female clique of the male gang, Puerto Rican females saw themselves as part of the male gang. Hagedorn and Devitt (1999) concluded that the difference might be explained by the fact that Puerto Rican females were more likely to have boyfriends or relatives among the male gang's leadership, which was predominantly Puerto Rican.

The number of immigrants is increasing in Latino communities, and immigrant gangs are forming in a number of cities. A study in San Francisco compared Mexican American, immigrant Salvadoran, and African American female gangs and, as discussed on page 6, found distinctly different patterns of sexual exploitation by male members and drug dealing activity among females from one gang to another. However, both Latina gangs—but not the African American gang—were fighting gangs and were highly territorial (Brotherton, 1996). This study supports the argument that communitywide ethnic patterns of gender relations—in particular, relative degrees of subordination—are directly reflected in gangs.

Other Ethnic Groups

White female gangs have rarely been studied except for a brief report on an Irish gang that was active in Boston, MA, in the early 1970's (Miller, 1973).[15] Members of the female gang were arrested for truancy, theft, drinking, and vandalism. According to the report, these females, known as "Molls," wanted to be accepted by their affiliated male gang and "gloried in" their dependency on the male gang (Miller, 1973, p. 35).

A student of New York City's Chinese gangs remarked that "[w]omen are an essential part of Chinese gangs, although they are not allowed to be members" and noted that these women were a major source of gang conflict (Chin, 1996, p. 173). Unfortunately, the author did not elaborate on this point. These Chinese gangs appear to be criminal organizations rather than traditional youth street gangs. A Los Angeles newspaper reported that there were six female Vietnamese gangs involved in violence in the Orange County area (Klein, 1995), but as with immigrant Latino gangs, there have been few studies on male Asian immigrant gangs in the mainland United States and none on their female counterparts.

Long-Term Consequences

Although joining a gang is only an adolescent episode for some females, for others it is a turning point and a gateway to a life offering very little chance for a socially acceptable career. Researchers are divided in their assessment of gang membership for females, some arguing that it is "liberating" and some that it causes "social injury" (see Curry, 1998).

Some authors studying Mexican American gangs in Los Angeles imply that once a female leaves a gang, the gang's influence on her life ends (Quicker, 1983; Harris, 1988), but others disagree (Moore and Hagedorn, 1996; Moore, 1991). In the 1990's, most African American female gang members in Milwaukee regarded their gang involvement as an adolescent episode, but for Puerto Ricans in Milwaukee, as for Mexican Americans in Los Angeles, gang membership had long-term consequences. In Los Angeles, Mexican Americans who joined a gang were likely to be from families that were already stigmatized by conventional community residents. Joining a gang and wearing its conspicuous clothes further labeled them as unacceptable to the wider community. Many had joined the gang to escape abusive families, but gang membership actually constricted their futures. Membership virtually ruled out marrying nongang mates. Most female gang members married male gang members whose careers often involved repeated imprisonments. (By contrast, only one-fifth of the male gang members married females from the gang.) When they were young, these Mexican Americans, like Puerto Ricans in New York City, glamorized the gang, but on mature reflection, most felt that joining a gang had been a mistake (Moore, 1991).

Regardless of the cultural context, there is one constant in the later life of most female gang members: most have children. Most male gang members also have children, but the consequences are greater for females. When male gang members in Los Angeles were asked about major turning points in their teens and twenties, they usually talked about the gang, drugs, or arrests. By contrast, females referred to motherhood and marriage. Although most males abandoned responsibility for their children, most females reared their own children (Moore, 1991). In Milwaukee, as gang involvement in the drug business became riskier, women with children were more likely to opt for safer, if less lucrative, means of support (Hagedorn, 1998).

Taking Female Gangs Seriously: Areas for Future Research

The historic lack of research on female gangs suggests that almost every aspect of female gang members' lives requires further research and analysis. In listing research needs, therefore, this Bulletin must be highly selective. The following proposed areas of research draw specifically on the analyses in this Bulletin:

- **Female gang formation.** As discussed previously, several studies have shown that gang formation (for both males and females) is related to deteriorating inner-city economic conditions. However, no research has been conducted in the many cities where economic conditions improved during the 1990's to determine whether there has been a commensurate decline in gang formation or in the persistence of gang membership into adulthood. General economic conditions influence male and female gangs alike, but a related issue applies specifically to women: how welfare reform and the elimination of Aid to Families With Dependent Children affect female gang formation and gang persistence.
- **Reasons for joining gangs.** As most studies show, friendship, solidarity, self-affirmation, and a sense of new possibilities were found to motivate young inner-city females to join and remain in gangs. Several studies found that the female gang may be a refuge from physical and sexual abuse at home. Although sexual victimization is difficult to study, an understanding of it is relevant to programs designed to keep adolescent females out of gangs and programs designed to intervene with or provide safe havens for female gang members once they are in gangs. Additional research that provides a better understanding of why females join gangs may help communities develop prevention programs to deter female gang membership.
- **Ethnicity.** Because it bears so heavily on gender roles, ethnicity is important in understanding how female gangs function and is also relevant to program design. More research is needed on this topic, particularly with regard to Latina and Asian immigrant gangs, white gangs, and multiethnic gangs.
- **Gender roles in gangs.** Additional research is needed on the roles of females in drug gangs. Field research is also needed on female gang members' involvement in other economic activities—legal and illegal—and their participation in violence. This research should focus on the gender structure of gangs (i.e., whether females form an autonomous gang, a female auxiliary of a male gang, or part of a gender-integrated gang).
- **Delinquency and criminality.** More substantial data on female gang members' delinquency and criminality are needed. Two possibilities for developing such data are described below:
  - Continue national surveys of local law enforcement agencies. Despite acknowledged problems of police underreporting and of varying local definitions of what constitutes a gang or a gang-related offense, surveys of law enforcement agencies provide a valuable look at changes over time.
  - Use existing law enforcement data sets. Drawing on local reports, two State agencies have compiled valuable data on female gang members' offense patterns: the Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority analyzed the annual offense patterns of male and female gang members in Chicago (see table on page 5) and the California Department of Justice analyzed the lifetime arrest records of female gang members in Los Angeles. These data sets could be used as models for other States with endemic gang problems.
- **Later-life consequences of female gang membership.** Studies using systematic samples of former female gang members could identify factors associated with their success or failure in later life. Such studies would be useful for understanding the long-term consequences of female gang membership. In particular, research is needed on the incarceration experiences of female gang members and the role of female gangs in jails and prisons. More information is also needed about drug use and access to drug rehabilitation among female gang members. It is also important to know whether certain families have developed a tradition of gang membership and whether female gang members are more likely than male gang members to transmit that tradition to their children. There is no research to date on the children of female gang members.

Conclusion

Many aspects of female gang functioning and the lives of female gang members remain a mystery because relatively few researchers have considered female gangs worthy of study. In addition,

researchers face serious obstacles to the study of female gangs and, because of these obstacles, they often settle for unrepresentative samples. Gangs are highly suspicious of researchers and cooperate with them only under unusual circumstances. Female gang members, in particular, have been averse to talking about sexual abuse, whether it occurred at home or within the gang. Some field researchers have been able to work effectively with gangs to obtain representative samples and trustworthy data. Other researchers avoid resistance and what they perceive to be the danger involved in direct field studies. These researchers contact gang members through community agencies, probation and parole offices, and incarceration facilities, but each of these strategies entails unknowable biases in sampling and in response sets (see Hagedorn, 1990).

Unfortunately, female gangs have received little programmatic attention. The Family and Youth Services Bureau of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services had a program that explicitly addressed female gang members, but the program lasted only 3 years. The 1990's brought recognition within the Federal Government that female and male offenders have different programmatic needs. For example, the 1992 reauthorization of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act of 1974 specifically mandated more programmatic focus on female delinquent offenders. Several national programs have made efforts to reach females. Notable among these are programs created by the Boys & Girls Clubs of America that are directed at reducing or eliminating gangs and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's (OJJDP's) Comprehensive Community-wide Approach to Gang Prevention, Intervention, and Suppression, which is directed at gang-involved youth and their communities. OJJDP's program includes efforts addressed to females who are or who have been gang members. Across the five sites in this demonstration program, females represent 20 percent of the targeted youth. These programs offer a foundation to build on, but much more work needs to be done to address the needs of females involved with gangs.

Endnotes

1. In general, this Bulletin views a gang as an unsupervised group of youth that defines itself as a gang and develops its own norms and criteria for membership. Gang members are more responsive to peer socialization than to conventional agents of socialization, and the gang may become quasi-institutionalized (i.e., it may develop the capacity for self-perpetuation). This definition excludes hate groups, motorcycle gangs, and other exclusively adult gangs. The focus of this Bulletin is on female gangs. This term refers to gangs containing only female members: some of these gangs are autonomous and some are affiliated with male gangs. The term also refers to gangs that are controlled and dominated by females but that may include male members. The term "female gang members" refers both to individuals who are members of female gangs and to those who are members of gender-integrated gangs.

2. Although most early reports emphasized female gang members' departure from conventional gender-role norms, a recent report from Chesney-Lind, Shelden, and Joe (1996) observed that the media produced a counter-intuitive (and dubious) stereotype of female gang members as violent and out of control.

Family and Youth Services Bureau Programs for Female Gang Members

In 1990, the Family and Youth Services Bureau (FYSB) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services granted 3 years of funding for gang-prevention programs for adolescent females in Boston, MA; Denver, CO; Hartford, CT; Minneapolis, MN; St. Louis, MO; Seattle, WA; and Stockton, CA. FYSB hypothesized that female gang members often have children who join gangs and reasoned that keeping females out of gangs might have a multigenerational effect. In 1992, four more programs were funded: two expanded the services offered in Boston and Seattle, and two were established in Washington, DC, and Pueblo, CO. After consultation with researchers and practitioners from those projects (reported in FYSB's September 1993 publication *Connections*), FYSB began to sharpen the focus of those programs.

The 1993 FYSB *Annual Report* summarized key features of the programs:

> Participants outlined the key features of services that work: building support groups for at-risk females, promoting cultural awareness, empowering youths to succeed, expanding community awareness, sharing information on conditions that put adolescent females at risk of gang or criminal involvement, promoting employment opportunities, building spirituality, and providing consistency and support (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1993, p. 22).

Although these tactics might seem rather broad, they represented a considerable advance over the gender-role-bound programs of the 1960's (e.g., Hanson, 1964), which were largely limited to encouraging females to improve their self-image through cosmetics, dress, and deportment.

In operation, the programs varied considerably in recruitment practices, emphasis, and organization. David Curry (1998) reported on programs in Boston, Pueblo, and Seattle. Boston's program, which was situated in a housing project, included few females with records of delinquency and focused on building self-esteem. Pueblo's program recruited broadly and emphasized mentoring, cultural awareness, and conflict resolution. Seattle's small program, serving females referred by juvenile courts, focused on counseling and help with school and work. According to Curry (1998, p. 26), "All three programs have been held up as models by their respective communities, and all have received national attention." The final evaluation revealed significant reductions in five types of delinquency for youth in the Pueblo program and a significant reduction in carrying weapons among youth in the Seattle program (Williams, Cohen, and Curry, 1999). However, the programs were discontinued in 1995. "The growing disfavor for non-law-enforcement-based programs in Congress and the non-enthusiastic evaluation results," Curry argues, led to their demise and also precipitated the termination of other gang prevention projects funded by FYSB. The 11 FYSB programs represent the most important Federal efforts to date to provide programs specifically for female gang members.

3. The long-term effects of economic restructuring are summed up in the title of W.J. Wilson's 1997 book *When Work Disappears*. Industrial jobs were replaced by part-time or temporary work, with salaries that were often insufficient to support families. Under such conditions, the transition from adolescence to self-supporting adulthood became even more difficult for poorly educated young people than before.

4. One study of city characteristics found that the decline in manufacturing employment was strongly correlated with a rise in urban crime rates and number of gangs (Jackson, 1995).

5. This study offers a rare analysis of Asian female gangs. Most of the 13 female gang members in the study were either Hawaiian, Samoan, or Filipina. The authors indicated that ethnicity was a major organizing principle of the gangs (Joe and Chesney-Lind, 1995).

6. All of these studies involved African American, Mexican American, and Puerto Rican females.

7. A female gang member in Detroit, MI, commented that "the boys would get all the blame" for whatever the girls did (Taylor, 1993, p. 33).

8. Many jurisdictions count an offense as "gang related" if it is committed by a gang member. A few jurisdictions, like Chicago (see table, page 5), require a gang-related motive.

9. Status offenses include underage drinking, truancy, curfew violations, incorrigibility, and running away. These offenses would not be defined as offenses if committed by adults.

10. Neither the Los Angeles nor the Chicago source includes data on male gang arrestees. However, Block and colleagues (1996) found that in Chicago, between 1965 and 1994, drug offenses accounted for approximately 30 percent of arrests of both male and female gang members.

11. In these Mexican American gangs, heroin dealing was not an activity of the gang as a whole. Instead, individuals or pairs would go into business, and many hired fellow gang members.

12. Some researchers feel that Taylor's portrayal of the changing role of female gang members in Detroit is offensive, arguing that it revives a stereotype of the "liberated female crook" dating from the mid-1970's (Chesney-Lind, Shelden, and Joe, 1996). At that time, Adler (1975) contended that female criminality showed a new pattern of masculine-style violence and attributed this pattern to the egalitarian ideology of the women's movement. However, later analysis showed that the premise underlying the idea (i.e., that violent offenses had increased among females) was erroneous (Steffensmeier, 1980). Unfortunately, the anecdotal nature of Taylor's report makes it difficult to resolve this issue.

13. Another study of Mexican American gangs in Los Angeles also acknowledged the female gang's deviant behavior, its drug culture, and its violence, arguing that females emulated the males (Harris, 1988). See also Hunt, Joe-Laidler, and MacKenzie (2000) for the importance of drinking (alcohol) in the daily lives of female gang members.

14. A social worker's memoir of a year spent with a 12-member Puerto Rican female gang appeared earlier. Hanson (1964) reported both fighting and histories of early molestation, neglect, and abuse from family members and male gang members alike.

15. Other ethnic groups include white, Asian, and multiethnic gangs; all have been increasing. Surveys of law enforcement agencies in 1996 and 1998 showed more whites in gangs than before—14 and 12 percent (Moore and Terrett, 1998; National Youth Gang Center, 2000)—and a survey of eighth graders in 11 cities showed that 25 percent of all gang members were white (Esbensen and Osgood, 1997). The 1996 survey also reported that almost half of all gangs were multiethnic (Moore and Terrett, 1998), and the 1998 survey reported that 6 percent were Asian.

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